

Wildlife Tidbits - The Coyote

The Eastern coyote (the type found in MA) is a member of the canid family, like our domestic dog. Coyotes generally are four- to four-and-a-half feet long including the bushy tail, stand eighteen to twenty-five inches tall at the shoulder, and weigh twenty to fifty pounds. Often mistaken for a wolf, they are quite smaller. They are found in all states except Hawaii and are very adaptable, living in a wide range of climates and conditions -- suburbia to wilderness, sea level to over ten thousand feet in altitude. The size of the territory is directly related to the quality of the habitat, and it can take several square miles to support a coyote family.

Coyotes are omnivorous and make use of an astonishing variety of plant and animal foods including garbage, insects, rodents, rabbits, birds, deer, carrion, and even berries and fruits. Coyotes play an important role in controlling rodents and it appears now, according to researchers belonging to the Cook County Coyote Project, that they too may be the reason for the sudden end of the goose explosion in the outskirts of Chicago, IL. The local population of Canada geese had soared in the 1980's and 90's, but by 2000 the increase had slowed to about only 1 percent a year. An unknown predator was assumed to be the reason. Infrared cameras have exposed the coyote as a nest robber, one that carefully cracks open a goose egg and licks it clean. Evidence like this bolsters the conclusion that coyotes, in their own wily way, have become keystone predators in a land long emptied of wolves and mountain lions. The Cook County project's principal investigator, Prof. Stanley Gehrt of Ohio State University, speaks admiringly of his subjects, who have withstood more than 200 years of hunting, trapping and poisoning and are more entrenched in North America than ever. Egg-rustling, night-howling varmints are raising litters in storm drains, golf courses, parks and cemeteries. They are sometimes heard but seldom seen. In cities, they keep to themselves and work nights. There are coyotes living in the Chicago Loop.

Professor Gehrt goes on to say that one surprising discovery of the study was how little danger the coyote poses to his unknowing human neighbors. "The risk is quite low". If you assert yourself when you see one - by yelling and throwing sticks - it will respect your space and lie low. The coyote's tendency to avoid people - and more important, raccoons - has made rabies a non-issue, Professor Gehrt said, with only one case of coyote-to-human transmission ever recorded. Coyotes will behave, he said, as long as people do not feed them. Leave nothing tasty outside in an open trash can or food dish, and definitely nothing small and fluffy at the end of a leash."

OTHER POSSIBLE CONFLICTS AND SOLUTIONS

As said above, make sure you are not inadvertently attracting coyotes by leaving out open trash containers, feeding pets outside, or leaving spilled bird seed on the ground, which can attract small rodents that then, can attract coyotes. Pets, especially cats and small dogs, are seen by coyotes as a food source so it is important to supervise children and pets when they are outside.

Innumerable non-lethal strategies exist to discourage coyote predation on livestock, including guard animals (dogs, donkeys, and llamas), smell and taste aversion substances, shock devices, noise devices, and portable fencing. Poultry and hobby livestock can be well-protected from coyotes with fencing (both structural and electric) and by ensuring that the animals are properly confined in well-built cages or pens each evening.

Historically, trapping has never been a method for managing coyote populations in Massachusetts. In the past few decades, there have only been two land trapping seasons for taking coyotes. Hunting is more commonly used in the state for killing coyotes -- the coyote hunting season is four months long. If a coyote should pose a threat to public health or safety, the law allows for the use of prohibited traps for capturing those problem animals.

Excerpts taken from <http://www.livingwithwildlife.org/wildlifehelp/animals/coyote.html>

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